

## Festival Latino Diary

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In August of 1986, New York was in the throes of Festival Latino, an extravaganza that grows with each successive year. Presently, it is sponsored by Joseph Papp and The New York Shakespeare Festival, although it was initiated originally on the Lower East Side by ASPIRA and Teatro 4, one hot New York summer, ten years ago, in a semi-abandoned building on East 4 Street.

For Hispanic theatre people in New York it is an opportunity to see old and dear friends; to embrace courageous colleagues who continue to do theatre in the face of bomb threats and blacklists; to keep up with the latest *teatro popular* from its most prestigious practitioners, La Candelaria from Colombia and Rajatabla from Venezuela; to see one woman shows by the moving and joyful Norma Aleandro, and Uruguayan actress Estela Castro's interpretation of more than eighteen of the most famous characters created by Margarita Xirgu, the Catalanian actress for whom García Lorca wrote some of his plays; to see the New York premiere of Puerto Rican playwright Luis Rafael Sánchez's *Quintuples*, as well as *Pedro Navaja*, the jubilant Puerto Rican version of *The Beggars' Opera* at The Delacorte; and to see dance from New York Latinos, Guatemala, Argentina as well as flamenco from Spain.

Following are some of the highlights of the festival days.

### FRIDAY, AUGUST 22

ICTUS, the most cohesive theatre group in Chile, miraculously still active after thirty years, returned to New York for the first time in seven years to present *Lo que está en el aire*, a gripping portrait of contemporary Chile where an elderly music teacher, Doña Matilde, magically portrayed by Delfina Guzmán, one of the group's two artistic directors, is on her way to her dream trip to Europe. She sees a former student of hers being beaten and kidnapped at the airport. No one says a word. Her son-in-law, played by Nissim Sharim, the other artistic director of ICTUS, doubts her reliability. The horror story unfolds before us: one by one the people involved with Doña Matilde, her

daughter, son-in-law, students, doctors, disappear in a dramatic collage that intertwines realistic and expressionist techniques. The final image is of Doña Matilde, alone on the stage, affirming what she saw to unseen interrogators, defying the consequences in the name of the truth.

Speaking to the cast later, I echoed the audience's question, "How can you produce this in Chile? How do they allow you to perform such a scathing indictment of the government at theatre festivals abroad, in the United States, Uruguay, Canada, Venezuela, as you have recently done?" They smile ruefully as they explain, "It is easier for the dictatorship to allow us to fill two hundred seats a night than to close us and hazard a violent reaction on the part of the people, and perhaps even by our many friends abroad, including Amnesty International. As for allowing us to present this play here, it makes them look good. People naturally arrive at erroneous conclusions that things must be better, freer in Chile, to permit this.

The most dramatic refutation of the myth that things are better in Chile is painfully evident in the genesis of this particular work. The group's foremost actor, Roberto Parada, who played the part of the music teacher until he suffered a stroke this past May, is the father of the play's real life victim, the young sociologist who was kidnapped and found beheaded last year. In *Lo que está en el aire*, life, tragedy, fear and perseverance, Chile's daily bread, are transformed into art, to move and awaken each new public.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23

*Quintuples*, by Puerto Rico's most talented dramatist and novelist, Luis Rafael Sánchez, is a *tour de force* for two actors. Idalia Pérez Garay and Paco Prado, for whom Sánchez wrote the work, become the five Morrison quintuplets and their father in the six monologues. They bitterly criticize one another and the institution of the family as each one desperately and comically tries to leave the nest and find "love" by running away with various members of the Antillean Circus, surely a metaphor for contemporary Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, a land of misfits and marginal players in the world. As in all of Sánchez's work, and particularly in his best selling novel, *Macho Camacho's Beat*, language is the protagonist. *Quintuples* is no exception. Language defines each character: Dafne, the extravagant; Mandrake, the narcissist; Bianca, the neurotic; Baby, the escapist; Papá Morrison, the Macho; and Carlota, the nasal, very precise and very pregnant one, who elicits the most laughter as she uses her "improvised" monologue to give explicit instructions to audience members, in case she has to give birth on stage. The two actors coax, cajole and instigate the seventh character—the public—to respond and participate with them.

The performance I saw was a bit cold at the beginning; the audience kept its distance, but warmed up especially in the Second Act. Paco Prado seemed to create more shading in his interpretations, while Idalia Pérez Garay, whom I consider to be one of Puerto Rico's most talented actresses, somehow did not project the full range of dramatic development that she usually does. The surprise ending, the unmasking of the two actors in front of the public, is a salute to theatre, "a daring feat of acrobatics, a ferocious risk." Perhaps the



*Quintuples* de Luis Rafael Sánchez. Teatro de Puerto Rico, Inc. Festival Latino de Nueva York, 1986. Francisco Prado en el personaje de Baby Morrison. Courtesy: Doel Vázquez, fotografías.

best proof of this magic is when the actors do take their final bows and we feel as if we had been watching many more than just two of them all evening.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23

Since 1967, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre has been doing just that—traveling to the people of the five New York boroughs and bringing them comedy, tragedy and the best of Latin American, Spanish and Puerto Rican theatre. Eduardo Iván López has incorporated the symbol of the summer, the Statue of Liberty, into his bilingual, musical comedy *Lady with a*

*View*. It happily reminds me of the Dolores Prida/Victor Fragoso musical with a message, *La era latina*, which I trekked out to Queens to see the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre present in 1981. This time I got to return to my old neighborhood in the Bronx, 176 St. and The Grand Concourse, to see the enactment of a new immigrant drama. Wonderfully sweet voiced Nina Laboy (Josefa) plays an undocumented Hispanic who is determined to give birth to her child at the site of the Statue of Liberty. What could have become pabulum remains sharp and critical thanks to the cynical, streetwise teenager, Johnny, played by charming young Reuben Gaumes, the perfect foil for Josefa's idealism. The glue that holds the production together is the rhythmic and lilting criollo music and lyrics of Fernando Rivas. He faithfully captures the beat, be it salsa, rap or criollo in all his songs.

I always watch the audience watch the play, and this audience was appreciative, supportive and alive. When Josefa admonishes street smart Johnny that he's got to stop "hanging out" and start going to school and reading, one mother spontaneously chimed in, "That's right!" The play's message is about friendship and learning, about believing in oneself and loving one's far away *patria*, while at the same time having to leave that homeland and lead a displaced life in America. The wildest applause came from the musical refrain "Es mi país y no lo puedo olvidar." The play does not explore the contradictions inherent in the situation of an immigrant who loves America, or needs America enough to chain herself to the Statue of Liberty, and her relationship to that same America that has already deported her husband and will also deport her. In the song "Mi tierra" ("Viene la revolución. Se para la ilusión. Pronto empiezan a odiar.") the lyrics reflect a distressingly reactionary attitude. The original set by James D. Sandefur, combined with the spontaneity, energy and professionalism of the troupe, make this a winner.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 24

I think an image that will remain with me forever is the opening scene of *Bodas de sangre* presented in the natural amphitheatre of the Catskill mountain town of Thompson Park with one hundred thirty-five actors, dancers, and musicians from the State of Tabasco in Mexico. First ten, then twenty Indian men, all dressed in white, on horseback, galloped towards the stage-plaza, approaching at every angle, from all parts of the forest. The women entered on foot, wearing colorful native skirts, dancing and laughing as they appeared from another part of the woods. Then more horses and more children adding to the others who gracefully placed themselves in what would become a tableau, a living picture, not unlike Sondheim's intention in *Sunday in the Park with George*. And through this striking natural "set" parades Death, on a black horse, somber, terrifying, touching all corners of the green expanse and silently riding away. The spaciousness of the acting area and the seemingly larger-than-life horses conspired to make us in the audience feel as if we were inside a movie, or actually living in Lorca's Andalusian landscape.

Different from the ultra sophistication of Seurat's Paris in the 1900s is this dramatic frieze that sets the tone for the inexorable tragedy that is *Blood Wedding*. This production is a glimpse of theatre as ritual, and director María

Alicia Martínez Medrano is one who knows that an audience must be hooked from the first moment. There are no second chances. This Oxolotecan version is all detail: long flowing hair, perfectly placed skirts, hanging saddles and religious icons adorning plasterboard walls of simulated *casitas*. Wherever you look you see people frozen into living statues on the stage, which is really not a stage but rather an open grassy meadow, magically transformed into the jungle town of Oxolotan on Mexico's southern coast. Whatever follows must live up to this spectacular entrance which caused audible intakes of breath in the public. There were moments that did live up to it, such as the famous wedding scene which my fellow critic Samuel Cherson exclaimed "was more like a real village celebration than theatre." Interestingly the entire production was Oxolotecan style, not Andalusian, with three bands, marimbas, native Chontal drums and flutes and spirited popular dances.

What is most difficult to capture is the structure of El Teatro Campesino e Indígena. It boggles the mind to imagine that they have done a play with four hundred fifty children, outdoors where all of their plays are presented. However, after talking to the producer, Julieta Campos, the director, the technical support staff and some of the fourteen teachers who also act in the plays, the originality and scope of the project became understandable. What is most fascinating about the Workshop is that the actors are Indians and *campesinos* from seven provinces in the state of Tabasco, some teenagers, some with families, who begin their regular work day at 4:00 a.m. and attend theatre rehearsals in the evening. They travel five to eight hours each weekend in especially provided government buses to reach Oxolotan for seminars, rehearsals and presentations. The person responsible for developing theatre and the arts in these underdeveloped communities, and providing stipends for the actors, is Julieta Campos, one of Mexico's most important writers and coincidentally the wife of the Governor of Tabasco.

As she explains in a selection from her forthcoming book describing the creative process of the three-year old Workshop, this is "culture *by* the people, rather than culture *for* the people, where you might take an Indian group to a concert or the movies, showing them forms that all originate from the capital." She asserts that "the goal of the Workshop is to prepare teachers, actors, directors, producers, dancers, scenographers and musicians capable of imparting what they have learned in more and more rural communities. They are trained to recover the cultural values of community life but they also make theirs those elements of national and universal culture they consider acceptable and valuable." With entire communities participating in the construction of the sets, furniture, native costumes and the making of music, "art then forms a part of peasant life. Natural space becomes scenic space; traditional music and dance combine to form 'total' theatre." And that experience of "total theatre," presented with great intensity and dedication, was what the public responded to so warmly that particularly windy Sunday in Thompson Park.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27

*Bolívar*, from Rajatabla, the highly respected Venezuelan popular theatre troupe, produces an effect similar to the cumulative impact of *Nicholas*



*Bolívar* de José Luis Rial. Rajatabla. Festival Latino, Nueva York, 1986. Courtesy: Miguel Rajmil, fotografías.

*Nickleby*, with its numerous characters playing multiple parts. The play's central concept is a demythification of the larger-than-life Bolívar of the textbooks, and a recreation of Bolívar, the man, through his own words and agony. The hook is that this drama within a drama about Bolívar is being enacted, by force, by the inmates of a Latin American prison, as they are beaten and manipulated by their tormentors, the guards. The striking visual montage, doubling of characters, heavy religious symbolism, the incense filling the theatre space, the choir chanting and moaning in Latin, replete with soprano Castrati, reminiscent of Nazi days, all serve to emphasize the fascistic ritual being enacted.

The content of the controversy in the vestibule after *Bolívar* was stimulating. "Was this too much montage for a flimsy theme?" wondered Peruvian writer Isaac Goldemberg, "But Bolívar is the epic of America," Argentine writer and professor Nora Glickman heatedly retorted. People were somehow moved deeply at the end, although many admitted that much of the convoluted discourse was unintelligible to them. Why then were they moved? Ah, but this is the essence of theatre, what we wait for; the inexplicable, that "being moved" and not necessarily knowing why; the mystery. The sheer pageantry, ritual and essential theatricality of *Bolívar* affected us on a non-intellectual visceral level. José Antonio Rial, the charming, articulate and generous seventy-five year old author clarified what he saw as a multidimen-

sional work, open to numerous interpretations. For me the key lies in his statement, "Remember, I am from the generation of André Breton and the Surrealists."

Perhaps the highest compliment that can be paid to this year's Festival Latino is the volume of animated discussion that continued well after the performances. Plays are often easily categorized or dismissed. This year seemed to be different. I missed the weekend workshops on all aspects of theatre that the Festival participants usually attend and that were not held this year. My annual criticism is that the Festival should be held during the academic year, and not in the summer, for maximum exposure. But of course that is political and has to do with Mr. Papp. None of these criticisms, however, takes away from the excitement and opportunity of Festival Latino. ¡Qué viva! Especially this year's Festival which happily seems to have returned to its popular theatre roots.

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